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Thursday, December 10, 2015

Survey: More Kanawha residents have had adverse childhood experiences

by Lori Kersey, Weekend Editor

More than a quarter of the people — mostly in the Kanawha metro area — who responded to an informal survey about their childhood experiences said they had four or more adverse experiences growing up.

That’s according to the results of an online adverse childhood experience survey by the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department.

A little more than 500 people responded to the survey, which was posted on the health department’s website from Nov. 12-28. Sixty percent of those who responded were from the Kanawha County metro area. There were also respondents from Ohio County and Monongalia County among others, and from six other states, Dr. Michael Brumage, executive director and health officer for KCHD, said.

Of the respondents, 28.2 percent had an ACE score of 4 or more out of 10, Brumage said.

“Even though this was an informal survey, it suggests that there is a much greater burden of ACEs here than in the reference population from Kaiser Permanente,” Brumage said.

The health department’s survey was based on a similar study conducted as a collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente’s Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego.

In the CDC survey, only 12.5 percent of the 17,000 San Diegans who responded — people who were mostly white, upper class and college educated — reported having four or more adverse childhood responses.

Brumage said KCHD’s survey was not meant to be a scientific study of the population, but to introduce the idea of using ACE scores in public health.

Adverse childhood experiences have been linked to increased risks of smoking, depression, drug abuse, suicide and other negative health factors — though having only positive childhood experiences does not make a person immune to those problems, Brumage said.



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“Even people with an ACE score of zero can commit suicide, but [the risk] is much greater the higher the ACE score,” he said.

Childhood experience is something to consider when addressing drug abuse and other problems but it should not be the only factor, Brumage said.

Higher ACE scores have also been shown to lead to poor work performance, higher absenteeism and lower earnings, he said.

Some programs that work with children are already taking into account adverse experiences, Brumage said, such as the Handle with Care program that started at Mary C. Snow West Side Elementary two years ago. Charleston officers who respond to incidents at students’ homes will alert the school that the student was present at a traumatic event, such as a domestic violence incident. The teacher then knows to handle the child with extra care that day. The program has since expanded.

Parents who know their own ACE score can work to reduce their children’s ACE score, said Michelle Rollyson of the West Virginia Infant/Toddler Mental Association.

“You can turn it around,” Rollyson said. “So if you know what your ACE score is, then you know how to work in a better relationship or environment with your child. Then you can reduce your child’s ACE score as they grow into an adult.”


ACEs are primarily used in the social work field now, but Brumage hopes the survey is the first step in using them in public health.

“At a population level, if we don’t really deal with these effectively we’re going to be dealing with this 20 or 30 years from now when this group of children grows up not having received the kind of care they need to,” Brumage said.

There’s also a statewide organization forming to focus on the effects of adverse childhood experiences, he said.

The West Virginia ACEs Coalition will meet for the first time next month at the health department, he said.

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